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Culture

On Queer Fandom and the Radicalization of the Underdog

Fan Service is a column by pop culture and fandom writer Stitch that looks at the highs and lows of fandom, and unpacks how what we do online, and for fun, connects back to the way we think about the offline world.

BY STITCH

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There's a certain kind of fantasy about queer fandom spaces. A utopia, where queer content flows fast and free and queer fans come together to celebrate queerness in many forms. It's the ultimate safe space for queer fans.

Sadly, that utopia doesn't actually exist, because people are still people in and out of fandom, and they bring their biases, perspectives, and racism with them into online spaces – even when they're queer themselves. But that doesn't mean things can't be better — and that there aren't practical solutions for how to make queer fandom spaces truly exist for *all* queer fans.

These spaces should be ones where we're protected and where we can explore our identities in fiction or in conversations with other queer people. We shouldn't have to be left out of the fantasy. We shouldn't have to feel unsafe simply by stanning something or someone. Let's start with some of the biggest issues I've noticed across a lifetime of being queer in fandom, and get into some problem-solving.

"Ace Discourse" and Exclusionism

First, let's talk about one of my longest-running issues with the way queer fandom handles identity: "ace discourse." While it's difficult to trace the beginnings, ace discourse took hold of queer social justice spaces on Tumblr in 2010 and then built up steam as it moved into fandom at large over the years. On the surface, "ace discourse" is what the label says: discourses or conversations about being asexual and what that means in conversation with queer theory.

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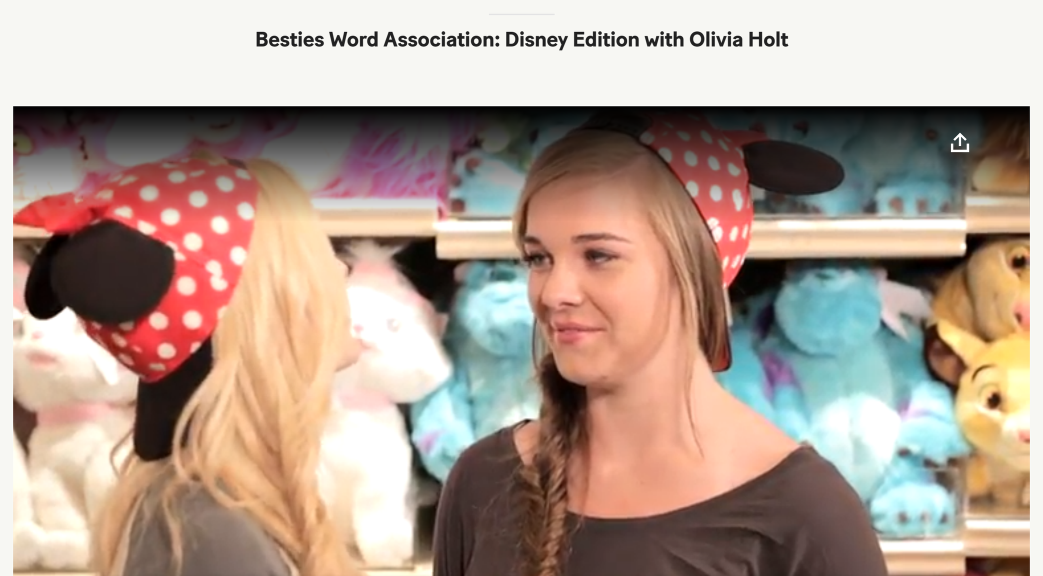

In reality, however? Tumblrized queer theory and what would come after it – commonly known as exclusionism – became a way to decide who was "really" queer and then punish people for claiming queerness online. In fandom, people's marginalized identities are often (unfortunately) used as a trump card to win ship wars and shut down even the most valid criticisms. (Ex: "I'm Asian and I don't think the 'Dragon Lady' stereotype is racist... so you shouldn't either.") Ace discourse is often leveraged as a way to define and control who gets to be queer in these spaces and whose queerness counts when it comes to content creation and consumption.

It hinges on positioning an ace person as not Queer Enough to create specific kinds of queer content – especially when it's NSFW. Because of commonly believed stereotypes about asexuals, the idea of someone being both largely uninterested in sex *and* the author of an 18+ fan fiction that's hotter than a five alarm fire is still something many people struggle with. Over the years I've seen asexuals told that they're lying about their identity because they wrote a spicy slash fic or because they commented that some fanart was "hot" and of course, constantly, asexuals in fandom who talk about that are often dismissed as "secretly hets" by people who really should know better about how queerness isn't a monolith.

It's all about exclusion, a desire to "protect" queer communities from outsiders, gone awry. Ultimately, the people harmed by these conversations *are* queer themselves, and queerness isn't clear-cut. Across history and queer theory, what gets claimed as queer can be contested and even controversial because we're all shoved under an umbrella that's too large and too small for us at the same time.

In and out of fandom, queerness is a thing that's hard to define. For me, I build off of a very broad understanding of queerness like David Halperin's. In *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Halperin says that "queer" as an identity is "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant." In much of queer theory, queerness is mostly defined as going "against the norm," which is a pretty broad umbrella. Asexuality *does* go against the norm, and it is queer. Rather than assume that the asexual writing that E-Rated *Loki* fix-it fic is a cishet person claiming queerness to fetishize a queer villain... why not pull back a little a think "what if my queerness isn't *their* queerness... and that's okay"?

The Radicalization of the Underdog

Fandom is also a form of social community building that positions some people as "in group" and others as outsiders, and that outgrouping occurs very quickly. That setup puts all members of the queer community in a position to fight with one another over what they see as a dwindling amount of resources and attention. This resource grab fuels radicalization within our shared fandom spaces.

When it comes to the way that queer fandom radicalizes queer people towards in-fighting and even some levels of harassment – and even bigotry – all it takes is one spark. Once someone is proven to be problematic and a supposed danger to the queer fannish community (their previous fan fiction output, the ships they like, the people they're vaguely friendly with), it becomes okay to push them out of the group (here, a queer fandom space) and make callouts that often misrepresent the core beef. In hours, that spark turns into a wildfire and does a massive amount of damage that's never seen as such because the people doing so think they're doling out justice.

"Radicalization often works through understanding oneself as under threat. A subset of white people who feel the small tremors of not being as dominant as they used to be, then think that it's 'open season on white people,' for example. In much the same way, the fact that fandom has this identity as underdogs makes us more susceptible," says Dr. Mel Stanfill, a fan studies scholar, author of Exploiting Fandom, and editor of the Reactionary Fandom special issue of Television & New Media. "That's what we saw in Gamergate, etc. with the idea of nerds as a marginalized group losing control of media, for example. I think this is part of what you run into all the time when critiquing racism in fandom — people primed to see fandom as always as under attack respond out of that priming. (The other part, and probably a bigger chunk, is that same 'white people not okay with being less dominant' thing above, of course.)"

Ace discourse and exclusionists in fandom make fandom spaces less safe for queer fans because they demand that we self disclose to strangers and "prove" that our identity is Queer Enough to validate what we like or dislike in a given space. At the end of the day, excluding queer people and positioning them as "not queer enough" for queer fandom or out of a fear that they're secretly "not queer" is dangerous and damaging, something that weakens the community and forges a culture of suspicion and punishment.

"So correspondingly, a sense that that queerness is under threat can lead to seeing enemies in trans and ace people instead of recognizing that the threat is from cishet people in power, right?" Stanfill notes. "And then once you're in that threatened mode, the rabbit hole of seeing more and more risk and threats is right there and, in particular on algorithmic platforms, going to be served up."

And Then There Are the TERFs

When we talk about threats to fandom, this one is external *and* internal. The threat of TERFs – an acronym for "trans exclusionary radical feminist" that is not and never has been a slur – to queer fandom is one that echoes their threats to spaces outside of fandom. "Gender-critical feminism, at its core, opposes the self-definition of trans people, arguing that anyone born with a vagina is in its own oppressed sex class, while anyone born with a penis is automatically an oppressor," journalist Katelyn Burns writes. "In a TERF world, gender is a system that exists solely to oppress women, which it does through the imposition of femininity on those assigned female at birth."

So how does that play out in fandom? Think about how many fans *still* support *Harry Potter* even after Rowling showed her bigoted values on main — and worse, how much of her current fandom on social media *became* her fans because she's a bigot just like them (see: Putin). Nostalgia fuels so much of fandom, but when the person responsible for your fandom is an active bigot funding and fueling transphobic hatred and their work isn't actually devoid of that content? It's time to divest.

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Beyond that, queer fandom has a TERF problem in part because plenty of folks... suck at identifying TERFs but are excellent at echoing their ideals in the middle of fandom fights. Many people – who may not call themselves TERFs, but otherwise move exactly like them – parrot gender and bio-essentialist beliefs about people, and that bleeds into the fanworks they create, engage with, and share.

It's frustrating to come across people who've created anti-trans fandom events for their specific fandom. Even in my main fandom for BTS, I've seen TERFs co-opt BTS's empowering Love Yourself/Speak Yourself tagline to validate spewing bigotry or excuse the fact that they've put together anti-trans rules for fandom events — like saying that "real men" don't have vaginas so trans masc versions of the characters are unwelcome in dudeslash events, or explicitly banning trans feminine versions of BTS in F/F events.

TERF rhetoric has become normalized online over time. Someone makes a good but suspect comment, and when you do due diligence and check their page... you're slapped with a bio that blends open hate for trans people and distaste for trans rights with their favorite fandom. There's no guaranteed way to get transphobic work or rhetoric taken down on any fandom-focused platform because folks tend to give bigots the benefit of the doubt. Meanwhile, no benefit is given to, say, queer Black fans who raise good-faith critiques of something happening on Twitter.

People keep forgetting that bigots can be fannish, too. Bigots don't just take a break from being a bigot just because they're in fandom. In fact, they twist the meaning of their fandom thing so that it is hateful. They try to use their fandom as a vehicle for bigotry and recruitment, bringing in new people and harming others. Queer fandom is unfortunately *not* immune to bigotry, propaganda, or radicalization. Think about how furry fandoms – which are known for being very queer friendly – have an ongoing problem with white supremacy and fascism that they still can't shake despite active efforts to run white supremacists and other bigots out of their spaces. Not all of the furries making those spaces unsafe for queer fans are actually cishet.

Where Do We Go From Here?

I know it's hard to figure out where to start when it comes to solutions to the threats toward queer fandom that come from *within fandom*. The easiest one is to shut down infighting within your corner of fandom and not fall prey to ace discourse or exclusionism. (Keep an eye out for the way people use "inclusive" as an insult or make vague posts that claim *all* asexuals want to remove NSFW content from fandom.) Research queer history on your own and ask questions of older or more educated queer fans if you're not sure about something. Call out (or in) another queer person saying something nasty about another queer person in fandom or regurgitating bigotry.

When dogpiling happens, support the queer person being harassed and report people being bigoted. Remember that you don't get to be the judge of anyone else's identity, and kids making different flags for their micro-label aren't hurting anyone by default. Learn to identify TERFs and other bigots as well as how they actually present and recruit in queer fandom spaces and in fan works. (Some ways to identify a TERF in fandom? They create F/F fandom events that explicitly exclude trans femmes or they complain about events and creators who are actively inclusive. They don't actually talk about trans women as women and treat trans dudes as confused babies that need to be "fixed." They continue to make excuses for Rowling even as her slide into bigotry accelerates.)

"I feel like there's an education piece, where we help people understand the bigger structures and patterns. But I also know you can't reach people who don't want to listen (even as a professor!)," Stanfill points out. "There has to be good faith and willingness to hear about one's own positions of privilege, which is like stuff from feminist antiracist trainings back in the day, but it works. But only in-community. So getting some BNFs on board to use their platform and say 'this stuff matters' and 'we should listen' is going to be the best way forward. But that's going to be slow and hard and uneven, and I don't see any way around that."

In an age where queer and trans identities are under fire, worldwide, from systemic and societal fronts, queer fandom *should* be a safe place for us to exist as we are. However, there's still work to do to make reality live up to the dream we've had of queer fandom... starting with how we treat other queer people in our shared spaces.

Stitch will continue discussing the many layers of fandom in Fan Service, published every other week on Teen Vogue. You can follow their work on Stitch's Media Mix and on Twitter.

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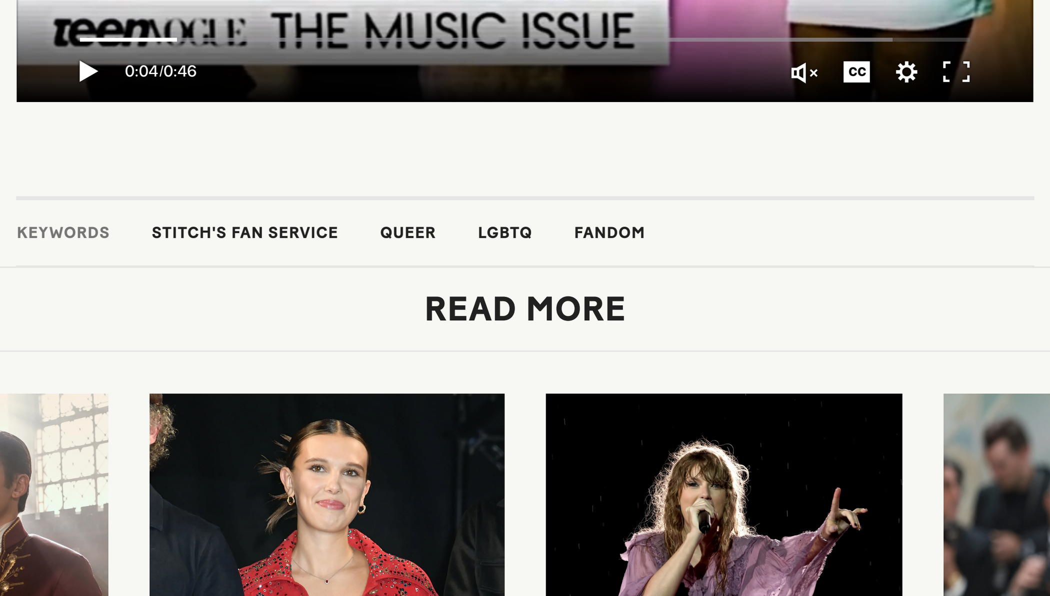

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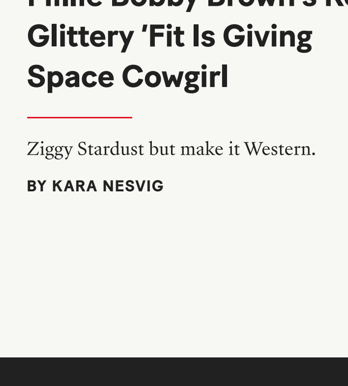

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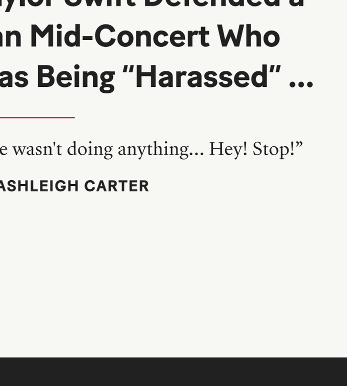

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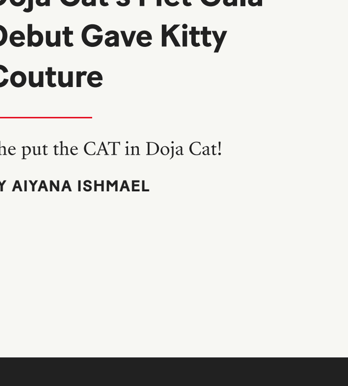

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